

Rethinking Digital Democracy

Large and Small Dynamics in Small Places; a case study in the Dialogic Relationship between Social Media and the News

"When major events occur, the public can offer us as much new information as we are able to broadcast to them. From now on news coverage is a partnership"

(Richard Sambrook via Newman and Dutton, 2011)

Background:

In March of 2013, the Kenyan people went to the polls to vote for their new leader. Their election was covered by the foreign media as usual until two trending topics on Twitter dramatically altered the day's coverage: #someoneTellCNN and #kenyadecides



Image source: http://static4.demotix.com/sites/default/files/imagecache/a_scale_large/1700-9/photos/1359585703-2013-kenyan-elections-bring-hope-to-youth_1761079.jpg

Reports of election violence were refuted and reframed, and many major media outlets picked up the trending stories from Twitter.

Soon after the election, the international media turned its attention to the newly elected president's indictment by the ICC for war crimes. Again, the Kenyan people showed the savvy to reframe the international representation of their local politics. This study investigates their reframing strategies and social media success.

Data:

The data for this study is a corpus of 145 comments following an article posted on the Al Jazeera English Facebook page. There was no headline on the listing itself, but the thumbnail picture and description are:

Analysis:

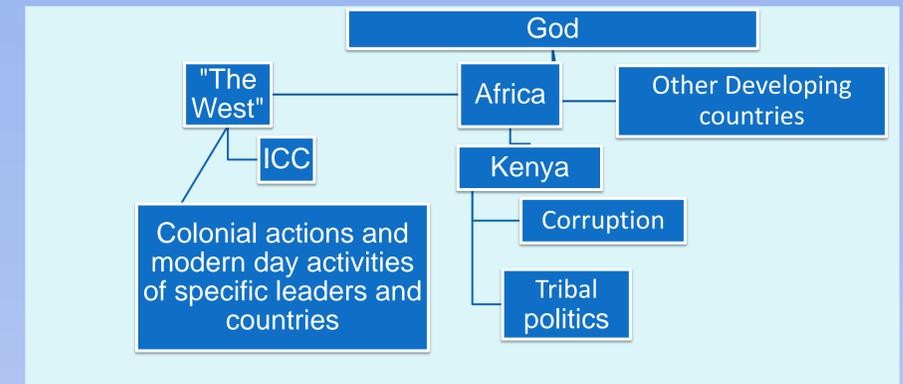
In Jan Blommaert's theory of sociolinguistic scales each scale carries with it the weight of history. Blommaert (2006) described the power of the scale dynamic: "terms operate, in other words, at different scale-levels for the different groups, and at such levels the ideological load of these words changes from innocent and factual-descriptive to loaded and politically emblematic." These scales are very different, but each served to reframe the conversation. Here are some examples of scale use from the data:

Invoking "The West:" "1,100 people? Thats nothin compared to those American former and present President."

ICC: "He was elected because of ICC. The elections were like a referendum on the ICC. People in africa see it as a new western imperialism."

Bringing it back to Al Jazeera: "Al propaganda, shut up. George Bush is sought after by multiple countries for crimes against humanity. Where's that story, you biased fools?"

The scales indexed by the participants are shown here:



Repeated coding showed that coding these scales was reliable across cases and coding rounds, but movement through the scales could not be reliably diagrammed or described. This could be a product of the CMC environment. The comments ranged from a single word to a few sentences, but were mostly about one sentence in length. That size of utterance doesn't lend itself to distinct movements between scales but an invocation or indexing of the scales was enough.

The dynamics reflected in here became the basis for a later report by Al Jazeera about the ICC indictment (pictured at right, cited below)



Implications:

- The conversation and framing around public events can be changed.
- Social media savvy is not just about being online. In order to become news, something in the large expanse of social media conversation must flag a journalist's attention. Many people and publics go online but do not do this.
- **Ultimately:** Social media participants have demonstrated the power to change the conversation around their politics, reframing their own political situation in a way that works better for them. This establishes an unprecedented, fast-acting dialogic relationship between social media participants and the news sources that have traditionally not covered them.

Main sources:

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